Erman's Egyptian Grammar.—By CHRISTOPHER JOHNSTON,
Professor in Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md.

WHILE Assyriologists have derived invaluable assistance from
the close analogy presented by a number of kindred languages
and from the numerous lexicographical and grammatical tablets
prepared by the ancient Babylonian and Assyrian scholars,[1]
Egyptologists have had no corresponding advantages. Egyp-
tian stands practically alone; there is no group of sister dialects
to throw light upon its structure and vocabulary, the Egyptian
scribes seem to have paid no attention to the philology of their
own tongue, and there is no grammatical tradition whatever.
In the complicated and imperfect system of writing employed
by the ancient Egyptians only the consonants are expressed, and
there is no guide to the vocalization and pronunciation of the
language except Coptic, which is at least 3000 years younger
than the oldest monuments of the parent stem. Many texts lie
at the disposal of the student, but comparatively few are suited
to the purposes of grammatical research, and by far the greater
number abound in errors and corruptions due to the ignorance
and carelessness of the scribes. It is nevertheless with such
unpromising material that the Egyptian grammarian must work,
and from it draw his conclusions as to the structure and usages
of the language.

In the early days of decipherment and discovery, and for a
long time thereafter, the study of Egyptian grammar in the
broader sense was an impossibility. The texts formed the only
basis for the study, and the texts were useless until they were
intelligible. Lexicography was therefore the prime need, and
while, with the steady advance of Egyptology, a considerable
number of grammatical facts became apparent, it was not until
a fairly copious vocabulary was established that the work of
classifying the facts discovered and deducing the general prin-
ciples could be attempted with any prospect of success. For
these reasons the grammatical treatises of the earlier Egyptol-
ogists have now little more than a historic value, but it should

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[1] *Cf.* Haupt, *Die sumerischen Familiengesetze* (Leipzig, 1879) pp. 4-9.

never be forgotten that the labors of these great men laid the foundations upon which their successors have built, and made possible the present development of the science in grammar as well as in other departments. Twenty-five or thirty years ago, the study of Egyptian grammar can hardly be said to have reached a very advanced stage. Champollion's *Grammaire égyptienne* (Paris, 1836) had, it is true, been superseded by later works, but the grammers of DeRougé,[1] Brugsch,[2] and Renouf[3] still offered little more than an elementary treatment of the subject. In the course of its long history, Egyptian, like all other languages, underwent constant growth and change, and the speech of the Old (*ca.* 2500–2200 B. C.) or Middle (*ca.* 2000–1700 B. C.) Empire would have been unintelligible to an Egyptian of the New Empire. In spite of this fact, which became more and more evident, serious difficulties attended a study of the historic development of the language, and little had been accomplished in this direction. As a rule the text books merely indicated that certain words and forms belonged to the oldest or to the latest period.

The historic method of study was first successfully applied to Egyptian grammar by Adolf Erman in his *Pluralbildung des Ägyptischen* (Leipzig, 1878), in which he discussed the formation of the Egyptian plural in the three chief stages of the language: in the Old Egyptian found in texts dating from the 4th to the 12th dynasty, in the later Egyptian of the 19th and 20th dynasties, and in Coptic. This valuable work, in which the author outlined his views on the true methods of Egyptian grammatical investigation, was but the preliminary to more extended undertakings. Two years later appeared Erman's second important work, his *Neu-ägyptische Grammatik* (Leipzig, 1880), wherein he gave a thorough and systematic treatment of the language of the New Empire (1600–1100 B. C.), employing as the basis of his work the tales, legal documents, and letters preserved in the hieratic papyri of the 19th (1350––1200 B. C.) and 20th (1200–1100 B. C.) dynasties. For wealth of illustration and clearness of exposition this work is unsur-

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[1] *Chrestomathie égyptienne* (Paris, 1867 ff.).

[2] *Hieroglyphische Grammatik* (Leipzig, 1872).

[3] *Elementary Grammar of the Ancient Egyptian Language* (London, 1875).

passed.   In connection with the *Pluralbildung*, it completely
revolutionized the domain of Egyptian grammar, and its influ-
ence upon the scientific development of Egyptian philology
would be difficult to overestimate.

Having thus clearly elucidated the grammar of the later
phase of the language of ancient Egypt, Erman now directed
his attention to the language of the older period.   As the start-
ing point for his studies in this direction, he selected the
Papyrus Westcar, a collection of tales of magic dating proba-
bly from the Hyksos period (1700–1575 B. C.).   The clear and
simple narrative of the text renders it peculiarly well adapted
for the purposes of grammatical investigation, while the lan-
guage, though exhibiting a few points of contact with New
Egyptian, is distinctly that of the Middle Empire (2000–1700
B. C.) and stands close to the classical speech of the older
period.   To the study of the Westcar Erman devoted a number
of years and the result of his labors appeared in his *Sprache des
Papyrus Westcar, eine Vorarbeit zur Grammatik der älteren
ägyptischen Sprache* (Göttingen, 1889).   In addition to this he
published a magnificent edition of the text in facsimile and in
hieroglyphic as well as in Roman transliteration, with a transla-
tion, commentary, grammatical analysis, glossary, and an impor-
tant excursus on the palæography of Egyptian hieratic papyri.[1]

In the light of the knowledge gained by his thorough study
of the Papyrus Westcar, Erman next extended his grammatical
researches to the whole field of Old Egyptian literature, and
five years later he gave, in his *Ägyptische Grammatik* (Berlin,
1894) a comprehensive treatment of the language of the Old
and Middle Empires (*ca.* 2500–2200 and 2000–1700 B. C.,
respectively).   His indefatigable labors had brought order out
of chaos, and the difficult undertaking outlined in his *Plural-
bildung*, some sixteen years before, might now be considered to
have been accomplished.   The historical method of study was
firmly established, his two invaluable grammars offered a clear
and scientific treatment of the older and the later language of
ancient Egypt, while the *Koptische Grammatik* (Berlin, 1894)
of his distinguished pupil, George Steindorff, had placed the
study of Coptic upon a footing commensurate with the progress
of Egyptian philology.   But more remained to be done.

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[1] *Die Märchen des Papyrus Westcar* (Berlin, 1890).

In 1889, Erman advised his pupil, Kurth Sethe, to undertake
the examination of certain classes of verbal stems in which the
morphological changes were less completely disguised by the
purely consonantal system of Egyptian writing.[1] Sethe, how-
ever was soon led to extend his examination to verbs of all
classes and to include the syntax as well as the morphology of
the verb within the scope of his investigations. The result of
his labors, extending over a period of ten years, was his great
work *Das ägyptische Verbum* (Leipzig, 1899), in which, after
an exhaustive investigation of Egyptian phonetics, he gives a
comprehensive discussion of the Egyptian verb from the earliest
to the latest period of the language, treating successively and
in the fullest detail the various classes of verbal stems, the
morphology of the verb, and the syntactical usages which
govern its employment. The results of Sethe's work are far-
reaching and, while they in general amply confirm Erman's
methods and theories, they have at the same time developed a
large store of new information, especially in the matter of
phonetics and morphology, and have thrown a flood of light upon
many subjects previously obscure. Erman promptly undertook
the preparation of a new edition of his grammar, which he
thoroughly revised, incorporating in it all the important discov-
eries made by Sethe, and utilizing also Griffith's researches into
the origin and development of the Egyptian system of writing
which had appeared in the meantime.[2] The new edition of
Erman's *Ägyptische Grammatik*, which appeared in 1902, pre-
sents therefore the best attainment of Egyptian scholarship up
to the present time, and sets the standard for all future work in
this field.

Among the most interesting of Sethe's discoveries is the fact
that originally the Egyptian stems were prevailingly triconso-
nantal. Biconsonantal stems are rare in the oldest texts, and the
few that exist evidently arise from the loss of a weak stem-
consonant. In the later periods of the language they become
continually more common through mutilation of original tri-

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[1] These were the stems containing a radical ℵ, the stems II. Gemina-
tum, and the irregular verbs,   Cf. *Sprache des Papyrus Westcar*, p. 11,
n. 2.

[2] Cf. *Publications of the Archaeological Survey of Egypt,* edited by
F. Ll. Griffith ; Nos. VI–IX (1897–1900).

consonantal stems.   The quadriliteral and quinquiliteral stems
that occur so frequently in Egyptian are either reduplicated
forms or derivatives from simple stems.   The fact that tricon-
sonantism was the rule in ancient Egyptian lends strong support
to the theory maintained by Erman and his followers—the so-
called Berlin school—in regard to the close relationship existing
between Egyptian and Semitic.   In a paper read before the
Berlin Academy,[1] in which he summarizes and reviews the
results attained in Sethe's *Verbum*, Erman expresses himself
upon this subject in no uncertain terms.   At some prehistoric
period, he believes, Egypt was invaded by Semitic hordes from
Arabia who conquered the Nubian inhabitants of the Nile
valley and imposed their language upon them.   The Egyptians
were therefore Semitized Nubians, to use Erman's own expres-
sion, and the language was primarily Semitic.   The unfamiliar
Semitic sounds were clipped and mutilated in the mouths of the
subject people, and the language underwent many changes, but
none the less it is a true offshoot of the Semitic stem, and never
entirely lost the impress of its parentage.

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[1] *Die Flexion des ägyptischen Verbums* in the Proceedings of the
Berlin Academy (Jan.–June, 1900) pp. 317–353.